

# Northfield has made amazing comeback

By BERNADETTE LETTIERI  
Special to The Gazette

**NORTHFIELD** — "Every 19 minutes the place goes crazy" has become an especially appropriate slogan to describe the racing action at Northfield Park.

This summer, attendance is up 49 percent and handle is up 35 percent over last year. New records are expected to be set for both figures by the end of the season.

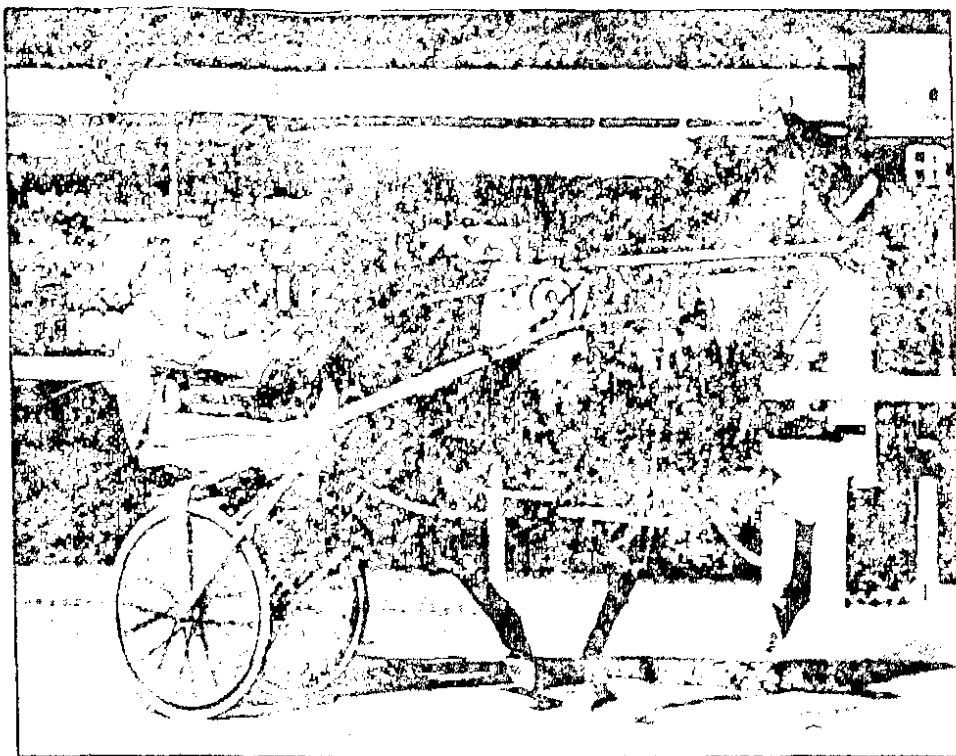
According to Gregg Keidel, director of publicity, "We're the fastest growing harness track in North America, percentage-wise. It can't be attributed to any single factor, but there's a number of them that have all contributed."

**HE FEELS** the most important of these is the 10-year \$10 million capital improvement program owner/operator Carl Milstein was able to finance due to a change in state racing regulations two years ago. Milstein reassumed control of the track from leases unable to meet obligations late in 1984.

Five million dollars have already been spent on upgrading track facilities.

"Most of the work was done in the grandstand and clubhouse for the fans," said Keidel. "Every inch of this plant has been either refurbished or totally remodeled."

Air conditioning and more than 500 seats have been added to the clubhouse, and each table now has a television monitor for a better view of the races. Betting carousels were installed to make wagering more convenient.



SEVERAL WORLD champion horses have come to Northfield Park this season, including Quite A Sensation, which set a track record in 1:54.4.

**IMPROVEMENTS** totaling \$350,000 have been made on the half-mile track itself in order to create Northfield's "flying turns."

Keidel explained, "Horses out from the rail used to lose ground. Now because the banking is so steep on that final turn, they actually get a sling-shot effect as they come off it, and it makes the finishes closer. Fans like the close, exciting finishes where their horse has a chance all the way to the wire."

Work has now begun on upgrading the stable area. A

new barn has already been built, while others are in the process of renovation, in an effort to make the backstretch more attractive. Also, ground has been broken for a dormitory for groomers.

Keidel said of Milstein, "He has a very keen eye for what the patrons want and what the horsemen need," while lowering track expenses as well.

A MORE serious effort has also been made to market Northfield's product, with an emphasis on bringing younger,

new fans to the races and familiarizing them with handicapping procedures.

The promotion budget has been doubled to \$1 million this year for television and radio advertisement and for tours and special programs. Wednesday's "Battle of the Ten Million Dollar Men," featuring John Campbell and Bill O'Donnell, each of whom has driven horses earning over \$10 million in purses this year, is one such event.

In order to compete with other forms of gambling, especially the state lottery, North-

field has instituted the Superbet, in which bettors must correctly pick both perfectas (in the fifth and sixth races) and the seventh race trifecta.

Keidel believes that the Superbet satisfies those interested in greater potential pay-offs for a \$2 bet, although he estimated the odds of winning at greater than a million to one.

**THE RISE** in the number of fans and attending and the amounts they have wagered has also improved the racing, as 8.4 percent of the handle is divided into the purses.

"Purses have stayed at a higher level than they used to," Keidel said. "And when the purses are maintained or raised, you get a better quality of horses."

He believes Northfield has the "ability to lure the world champion horses and the best drivers for the first time in 10 years. Because harness racing has been declining over the past five or six years nationwide, some of the better horsemen have agreed when they hear a success story (such as Northfield's) being told to come and help out and be part of it."

Proof of this is the fact that three world champion harness horses, Falcon Seelster, Quite A Sensation, and Manfred Hanover, have triumphed at Northfield this season.

**KEIDEL**, WHO has been with the track since 1980, and general manager Thomas Al-

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rich receive inquiries daily from management at tracks all over the country concerning Northfield's rapid comeback.

"We get many, many positive comments from the fans about the turnaround here," Keidel said. "We lost many fans over a five-year period because the place was going downhill," with unpaid utilities and back purses for horse owners.

In the future, Milstein would like to "try to make this place look more like a Las Vegas casino than a racetrack," according to Keidel, with fountains in the infield lake and animated horses on the front of the building.

Milstein's goal is to create an entertainment center around Northfield Park, with a sports complex for dining and viewing a variety of sports events on wide-screen televisions, and a hotel.

**THE OWNER** is also interested in establishing teletesting, which must be approved by the state. Patrons outside a 25-mile radius of the track would be able to bet on and to see live races from their homes with such a system.

Keidel said of Northfield's resurgence that, "Because I love horses and harness racing as much as I do, it's the most exciting thing I've ever witnessed ... Now the question seems to be, 'How much better can we do?' We're doing better all the time and there doesn't seem to be any end in sight."

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